

Old Customs House
Erie, Pennsylvania

HABS No. Pa.-53

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PHOTOGRAPHS,
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District No. 5-Pennsylvania

Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
Karl E. Morrison, District Officer
319 Marine Bank Bldg., Erie, Pennsylvania

OLD CUSTOMS HOUSE
Erie, Erie County, Pennsylvania

Owner.

United States of America.

Date of Erection

1839.

Architect

William Kelly.

Builder

Unknown.

Present Condition

Good.

Number of Stories:

Two, attic and basement.

Materials of Construction:

Vermont marble, stucco, brick, wood, iron, clear glass.

Other Existing Records:

Erie County Histories, Sanford, Nelson, Bates, Miller, Reed,
local newspapers files, court house records.

Additional Data-Bibliography:

History of Erie County, Pennsylvania; Chicago, Warner Beers
and Co. 1884.

A Twentieth Century History of Erie County, Pennsylvania-Chicago-
1909. The Lewis Publishing Co.--John Miller, historian.

History of Erie County, Pennsylvania, 2 Vols. Historical
Publishing Company 1925. Topeka--Indianapolis, by J. E. Reed
(John Elmer).

History of Erie County, Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, Lippincott
Co. 1861 by L. G. Sanford (Laura G.) Published by author and
copyrighted by her in 1894.

Nelson's biographical dictionary and historical reference book
of Erie County, Pennsylvania, Erie, 1896. Two-thirds of the book
by Benjamin Whitman. From the press of Wilson, Humphries and
Co. Fourth St., Logansport, Indiana.

OLD CUSTOMS HOUSE
415 State Street
Erie, Pennsylvania

The building, known as the "old" Customs House to distinguish it from the headquarters of the present Customs office, is located at 415 State Street. It attracts the attention of the passer-by with its unusual beauty set as it is among very usual-looking business buildings.

The building is small when compared to other nearby structures, not over two stories in height and is reached by an imposing flight of fourteen marble steps. Mr. John Miller in his history says that it is "One of the most noteworthy in the United States. It is one of the only seven examples in the country of pure Doric architecture." There is a marble terrace interposed between the seventh and eighth steps which rise to the portico. The pediment is supported by six fluted marble columns. These columns were brought from a quarry in Dorset, Vermont, twenty miles east of Whitehall, New York and were shipped via the Champlain and Hudson Canal to Albany, then on the Erie Canal to Buffalo and from there by steamer to Erie some time between the years 1836 and 1837. They were dressed, boxed and numbered at the quarry. Each column was divided into eight sections. The entire front of this building is of marble, the remainder is of brick covered with stucco.

High up in the portico in letters four inches high is carved, "William Kelly, Architect, 1839."

The building was originally built for banking purposes and was occupied by the United States Branch Bank of Philadelphia until 1840 when the parent bank failed and forced the closing of the Erie Branch. This building is said to have cost seventy thousand dollars, while the president's house south of it, and the barn located on east Fourth Street cost about ten thousand more.

In 1849 the United States Government purchased it from W. C. Curry who had been appointed to settle up its affairs and the property has remained in the hands of the government ever since. After being acquired by the government it was converted into a Customs House and the basement used as a bonded warehouse. In 1853 the Erie Post-Office was located in this building and remained there until 1867 when that institution removed to Eighth and State Streets.

From 1867 to 1909 this building was unoccupied, when the Grand Army of the Republic was made custodian. The interior was re-decorated but no major alterations have been made to change it. On September 26th, 1932 the Grand Army of the Republic gave up the place to the Erie County Historical Society who lease it from the United States and occupy it at the present time. Historically it is perhaps richer in associations than any other place in the city or surrounding county. Located directly in the center of the front, which faces the west, is a

OLD CUSTOMS HOUSE

doorway with two double doors which swing inward to a high and spacious hallway or entrance hall. To the right and left are located two almost square rooms, and directly in the rear of the hall are two more double doors leading into a very large room, having high windows on either end to north and south. Beyond this room toward the east are two more rooms, the one to the south containing a stairway leading to the second floor. Between these rooms is a double fireproof vault with interesting fire doors. The second floor has three rooms, and an entrance into the attic which is high and quite large, the northerly portion being a single room. The Grecian design is carried into the interior and manifests itself in mouldings, ceiling decorations, and many other ways. From the front south room a stairway descends to the vaults which are underneath the entire building.

Annis Scott Baxter

Approved

Paul Emerson Dist. off.
July 24, 1936.

Revised July 31, 1936, T.H.W.